

# Technical Assistance Bulletin

Office of Minority Health

Resource Center

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## Pretesting Is Essential; You Can Choose From Various Methods

*Use pretesting to help design materials and messages that work.  
Here are six methods from which to choose.*

Pretests show what works with a particular audience. The slogan that seems persuasive to an adult may be confusing to a sixth-grader. A poster that captures the

attention of teenagers in one community may alienate or seem boring to those in another.

### ***Use pretests to answer these questions.***

*Are your materials and messages:*

*Understandable?*

*Believable?*

*Personally relevant?*

*Culturally relevant?*

*Attention-getting?*

*Memorable?*

*Do-able?*

Pretesting can prevent problems like these. It helps ensure that materials convey a clear and effective message about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs to a program's

target audience. Specifically, pretesting can help program managers:

- Select message concepts — styles, formats, spokesperson, and appeals (such as fear, humor, compassion)
- Guide creative work

- Fine tune wording and visual images
- Guide revisions (before spending time and money on the finished product).

Pretesting is valuable at several stages of message and material development. Some methods can be used in the early stages to test concepts or general issues and to spark ideas; other methods are more useful when materials are in close-to-final form.

Factors to consider in selecting a pretest method include, in addition to the stage of development of the materials, the kind of audience at which the materials are aimed (e.g., professional, rural), the sensitivity and complexity of the materials, and the resources available. The following overview summarizes the purposes, requirements, pros, and cons of six pretest methods.

### **1. Focus Groups**

**Purpose:** To obtain insights about audience concerns, beliefs, reactions, and vocabulary.

Focus groups are small gatherings of 8 to 12 people who meet with a trained moderator to talk about ideas and

## Before You Begin...

### Don't plunge in until you've considered several issues:

- Pretesting is just one step in the communications process. Before you begin to plan materials and messages, you must define your target audience, determine their needs, and spell out your own goals and objectives.  
  
See the Resources list on pages 5 and 6 for possible sources of information on health communications.
- These sources can help you find out what other materials exist for your target audience and whether they have been pretested. One call to a resource center may turn up this kind of information.
- Valuable as pretesting is, it has the limitations of **qualitative research**; that is, it provides insights and ideas. It usually cannot provide statistically valid conclusions about your entire audience. Not enough people are involved, nor have they been randomly selected. Use **quantitative research**, such as polls and surveys, to obtain statistically valid data.

materials. This pretesting method is especially useful to answer questions in the early stages of a project: What kind of spokesperson could convince sixth-graders that drugs are not the path to popularity? What kind of format would parents prefer for information about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs? Also consider focus groups whenever you need new ideas and insights, which can emerge from group interaction.

**For example:** To help develop an antialcohol campaign slogan, preteens were asked to choose between six alternatives. On a questionnaire, one slogan emerged as the clear favorite. But in subsequent focus groups with the children, another slogan — “Drinking hurts” — appeared to evoke deeper feelings and led to lively discussions. As a result, planners learned that this concept could also be an important component of campaign materials.

**Use to pretest:** Program themes and images, general issues, materials in early stage of development.

**Minimum number of respondents:** 8 to 12 per group; at least two groups per type of respondent.

**Resources needed:** Trained moderator, discussion outline, list of respondents, fees or incentives to participate, meeting room, recording equipment, AV equipment if pretesting audiovisuals, analysis expertise.

**Pros:** Group interaction stimulates responses; can cover many topics.

**Cons:** Individual responses may be swayed by group response; can provide misleading information if not skillfully managed; cannot probe sensitive or complex questions.

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## 2. Individual Interviews

**Purpose:** To explore individuals' responses, feelings, and concerns.

Individual interviews elicit reactions to sensitive issues or complex materials and permit lengthy discussion of draft materials. Interviews are worth the extra time and expense when the response of an individual, free of group pressure, is important, and when long, confidential conversations may provide special insights.



**For example:** A coloring book for children of alcoholics could be pretested in individual interviews to help understand the children's responses. Certain images in the coloring book might be so strong that the child's response is denial that they apply to him or her. A quiet talk with a trained interviewer can give the child time to express complex feelings and provide ideas for less threatening images that might be more useful in reaching this audience.

**Use to pretest:** Program themes and images, sensitive issues, complex materials.

**Minimum number of respondents:** 10 per type of respondent.

**Resources needed:** List of potential respondents, fees or incentives (optional), trained interviewer, telephone or quiet room, tape recorder (optional), analysis expertise.

**Pros:** Can contact hard-to-reach audiences, such as people with limited reading and writing skills; can explore emotional or complex issues.

**Cons:** Can be time consuming to conduct and analyze; may yield no patterns in responses, especially if number of interviews is limited.

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### 3. Central Location Intercept Interviews

**Purpose:** To obtain many individual reactions.

Intercept interviews take places, such as shopping malls and schools, where many members of a target audience congregate. Intercept interviewers use questionnaires designed for quick answers, so that each interview is short and the results can be tabulated easily. Use intercept interviews when the stimulus of group interaction is not important.

**For example:** To pretest a poster urging pregnant Hispanic women not to use alcohol, interviewers can be stationed at a laundromat in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. The interviewers approach women who appear to be of child-bearing age. They explain the purpose of the pretest, ask a few screening questions to be sure the women belong to the

target audience, and then ask questions about the poster: "Is there anything you particularly like or dislike about this poster?" "What is its main idea?" If a large proportion do not perceive the main idea to be the one intended, the poster's language can be clarified.

**Use to pretest:** Print and audiovisual materials, program themes and images.

**Minimum number of respondents:** 60 to 100 per target audience.

**Resources needed:** Trained interviewer, structured questionnaire, access to central location (e.g., school, laundromat, mall), quiet spot for interview, AV equipment if pretesting audiovisuals; analysis expertise.

**Pros:** Is quick; can be inexpensive; can be designed to obtain quantitative data.

**Cons:** Short; cannot probe sensitive or complex questions.

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## 4. Theater Testing

**Purpose:** To obtain many responses at once; to measure recall under conditions that simulate actual viewing.

These pretests gather large numbers of people together to view messages embedded in other programming. This method simulates actual viewing conditions. Theater testing can help you learn how and whether your message stands out among the clutter of other messages broadcast each day.

**For example:** To pretest a public service announcement (PSA) aimed at teenagers, a theater test in a classroom can show it as part of a videotaped television program. Students then fill out a questionnaire asking what they remember and how they liked the program, other commercials, and the PSA. If responses show that the PSA was not well remembered, a more dramatic presentation may be developed.

**Use to pretest:** Audiovisual materials (which can then be adapted to print materials such as posters displayed with other wall hangings in a clinic).

**Minimum number of respondents:** 60 to 100 per target audience.

**Resources needed:** List of potential respondents, fees or incentives to participate, large room, AV equipment, questionnaire, analysis expertise.

**Pros:** Can simulate natural exposure to materials and help gauge how they compete with other messages; permits quick analysis of responses.

**Cons:** Can be time consuming to arrange; can be expensive.

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## 5. Self-Administered Questionnaires

**Purpose:** To obtain many individuals' reactions to materials.

Mailed or personally delivered, questionnaires accompany draft materials and elicit brief, individual responses. Questionnaires can be useful in reaching audiences who are widely

*Also use questionnaires to have materials reviewed by "gatekeepers" — such as radio talk show hosts, clinic directors, and teachers.*

dispersed, do not congregate in public places, and are not likely to attend focus groups, such as professionals and people living in rural areas.

**For example:** Questionnaires can be used to learn the reactions of school principals to proposed materials. In a pretest of a sticker to be placed on book bags and lockers, children in

focus groups said they thought a skull-and-cross-bones image was "cool" — particularly after group pressure began to have its effect. But principals who were surveyed separately said that they would not allow that particular sticker to be distributed. One explained that

the design said to children that risky behavior itself was "cool."

**Use to pretest:** Print and audiovisual materials.

**Minimum number of respondents:** 20 (100 to 200 is ideal).

**Resources needed:** List of potential respondents, questionnaire, postage if mailed, AV equipment if pretesting audiovisuals, analysis expertise.

**Pros:** Is inexpensive; can reach homebound or rural or other dispersed audiences easily.

**Cons:** May have low response rate (if mailed); may require followup; may take a long time to receive responses; does not permit control of exposure to materials.

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## 6. Readability Testing

**Purpose:** To gauge the reading level of materials.

If most members of your audience read at the ninth-grade level, your written materials should be at about this level. Readability formulas provide a rough indication of the grade level needed to understand text. When using them, however, remember that other factors, such as graphics and type size, also influence readability.

**For example:** The SMOG formula, one widely used method to test readability, uses both sentence length and syllable counts to estimate reading level. According to the SMOG formula, many health-related articles in popular magazines are written at the 12th-grade level and higher.

**Use to pretest:** All print materials.

**Number of respondents:** None.

**Resources needed:** A readability formula (see Resources list on pages 5 and 6).

**Pros:** Is fast; is inexpensive.

**Cons:** Provides only a rough indication; does not obtain audience reaction.



## Pretesting With Youth at Risk

Be aware of some special issues when conducting pretests with youth in high-risk environments. These include:

- **Lack of trust.** Interviewers may be seen as people in positions of authority and may arouse suspicion. Children and teenagers are quick to spot any sign of falseness and feel that they are being used or manipulated.
- **Need to test.** These youngsters may need to test the sincerity and "hipness" of the facilitator. If they can dupe him or her into believing something, they may, as a group, quickly make the pretest into a game of deception, thus turning the tables on the perceived manipulator.
- **Need to please.** High-risk youth may misinterpret the adult's interest as a form of personal attention and caring, which may be absent from many of their encounters with adults. As a result, they may become anxious to please the facilitator by giving the desired response.

Here are ways to cope with these problems:

- **Plan to hold more pretests than are normally recommended.**
- **Use a facilitator who shares some of the characteristics or background of the target audience.** Or use two interviewers, one of whom is familiar with the audience.
- **Allow ample time to explain the purpose of the pretests to participants.** Interviewers should tell how the information will be used and the reasons for any recording devices. They should also emphasize the eventual benefits of the materials for the audience.
- **Make it clear that there are no "right" answers.** In the absence of right answers, youngsters may feel uncomfortable and, in a group setting, may defer to a natural leader. By making it very clear that no answer is more desirable than any other and by responding to all comments in a positive way, the interviewer may be able to minimize this problem.
- **Have the results reviewed by someone familiar with the young people's environment.** They may have some special insights, especially into group interactions.

## Resources

Help with pretesting is available from many sources. University departments of marketing, communications, or health education may be able to help. Marketing research firms can be hired to help with certain aspects of pretesting or to conduct the entire process. For help in getting started, consider:

American Marketing Association. *Marketing Services Guide*. 250 South Wacker Drive, Suite 200, Chicago, IL 60606, (312) 648-0536. This guide, published annually, lists suppliers and services all over the United States and is available from the association.

CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500, Bethesda, MD 20814-4820. See box on back cover.

Marketing Research Association, 111 East Wacker Drive, Suite 600, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 644-6610. Publishes audience research guidelines and interviewer training materials.

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852, (301) 468-2600 or (800) 729-6686. Provides information on research literature, programs, and educational materials. Ask about the Regional Alcohol and Drug Awareness Resource (RADAR) network, which may have a resource center in your region.

Office of Cancer Communications,  
National Cancer Institute. *Making Health*

*Communication Programs Work: A Planners Guide*: 1989. This guide to all aspects of health communications, including pretests is available from OCC, Bethesda, MD 20892, (301) 496-5583 or (800) 422-6237. This guide also describes the SMOG readability formula and includes sample instruments for all six pretest methods.

Public Relations Society of America, 33 Irving Place, 3rd Floor, 15th and 16th Streets, New York, NY 10003. Ask about publications and local chapters' pro bono projects.

Rice, Ronald E., and Atkin, Charles K., eds., *Public Communication Campaigns*. Beverly Hills, CA, Sage, 1989.



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make all the copies you want.*

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Distributed by the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852.

This bulletin is one in a series developed to assist programs that are working to prevent alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact the CSAP Communications Team, 7200 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 500, Bethesda, MD 20814-4820, (301) 951-3277.



